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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Naturally, my last week at the golf course was one filled with rain! Last week, we postponed aerating the greens one last time for the year because of heavy rains. This week, we did the process anyway. What a mess for the crew that had to clean up after the fact! None of the work involved is "easy" for those involved; and, as [bad] luck would have it, I was one of the two guys at the end of the process - we got to shovel up all of the plugs that were pulled/blown off of the greens! I'm telling you, when those plugs are as wet as they were, it's like shoveling mud - wet and heavy! I slept well those two nights!

But you know what, I had it easy compared to one family that lives (or lived) in a small Tennessee town. You see, they happen to live in a house on the outskirts of a town in Tennessee. Because they lived outside of the town limits, they were required to pay a $75.00 annual service fee that would have provided them with fire protection. Well, the family forgot to pay that fee this year, and it cost him the family home, as well as the family pets.

Reportedly, a fire started in some barrels outside. The flames quickly moved to the house. Firefighters were called, but watched as the fire consumed the house. They didn't lift a finger, or a hose, to save the home!

Sorry, but I can't accept that decision, nor can I accept a law or provision that requires payment of a fee for city or town services that should be covered by local taxes. How barbaric is that?? This kind of thing reminds me of "protection rackets" by organized crime - pay us a regular fee and we'll protect your home or business from harm. It's extortion! Just what do you get for your tax dollar these days? I pay my town taxes every year, and some of that money goes to support the local schools. However, I don't have kids - do I get a partial refund? Of course not. Do I get any additional services to make up for those I don't need or use? No.

There's no plausible excuse for someone's home to burn to the ground while the firefighters stood and watched because of a missed fee payment. And to hear the mayor's excuse: "South Fulton Mayor David Crocker didn't exude compassion when interviewed for the same report, comparing the service to an insurance policy. ""Anybody that's not in the city of South Fulton, it's a service we offer, either they accept it or they don't.""

A family in Tennessee didn't accept. They lost their home over a $75 fee.

Just where is this country headed?!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. First of all, let me apologize for missing last week's issue. I've had more allergy attacks and sinus infections this year than I can count... and I'm not going to say whether that says more about my memory or my math skills. [grin]

And from what healthcare professionals are telling me, it's not just me. This year seems to have been an active one for respiratory issues. If I had to guess, I would say that it had a lot to to with pollen from plants spurred on by warm temperatures and lots of rain early in the spring, and enough of both to keep the cycle going throughout the summer... but that's just a guess.

At any rate, my latest bout with sinus/respiratory issues has gotten me to thinking again about the state of our healthcare system.

The word 'Obamacare' is on the lips of every self-respecting (often the ONLY thing they respect) teabagger this election cycle, since it's what their feeble minds have been told is "socialized medicine"... and THAT is one of the buzzwords they love to throw around... socialism. I guarantee you that a majority of them couldn't give you a definition of socialism if asked, but nonetheless, they're afraid of it. It seems to me that the "grass roots" conservatives just love to be afraid of things. They wear it like a badge of honor and wrap themselves in the tissue of worries and woe doled out to them by whoever happens to be talking the loudest at the time.

I just love the people who get so up in arms about "socialized healthcare" and government-run programs, and are afraid that it'll screw up their social security benefits... ummm, guys?... look at the first word in "SOCIAL Security"... ring a bell? Mean anything to you?

The fact is that Social Security IS an entitlement program. That means that it's not an insurance policy, it's not a club or group. You are entitled to benefits simply by virtue of the fact that you're a citizen of a certain age and have paid into the system. And most people seem to think that it IS a type of insurance policy or an escrow type of thing where your money is held in trust for you. That's not the case either. The money you pay in this week goes into someone's monthly check. That's the way it was set up; that's what it was always supposed to do.

And there are, of course, always people complaining that Social Security isn't enough to live on. They're right... at least in most cases. It was never meant to be a sole means of support. It's a supplement, not a retirement package.

What gets me, again, is the people who complain from both sides of the argument: That they don't like the idea of socialized anything, and that

what they do get from the government isn’t enough to live on.

Now Medicare is a different situation entirely. Medicare IS state-sponsored insurance. It’s actually an insurance policy that you pay a premium for. Granted, this is no paradise situation for anyone... except maybe for those who defraud the system. And there are always plenty of those. One of the things that people don’t see when they start screaming about fraud and abuse is that the only means the government really has to weed out fraud is to make the system slower and more difficult for everyone. That results in a lot of frustration, since everyone who screams about it assumes that their benefits will remain unaffected, since they couldn’t POSSIBLY be the problem. Well the government don’t know that, Chucky. As far as they’re concerned, the problems could be any of us.

Hahahaha! You’re not going to believe this. JUST as I finished typing that last paragraph, there was a commercial on television for http://www.stopmedicarefraud.gov. Check it out if you’re interested.

Then there’s Medicaid. That’s something a little different. It’s designed for low/limited income families, individuals with disabilities, and is funded by both federal and state governments. Another instance of ’government interference’... until you need it.

So what’s the buzz about this "Obamacare" and why are people so against it?

Well, in short, people aren’t necessarily against it. There are those who are against Obama, those who are against the "bleeding heart liberals", those who are, in short, just against. It reminds me of the old Groucho Marx song...

> I don’t know what they have to say
> It makes no difference anyway
> Whatever it is, I’m against it
> No matter what it is or who commenced it
> I’m against it
>
> Your proposition may be good
> But let’s have one thing understood
> Whatever it is, I’m against it
> And even when you’ve changed it or condensed it
> I’m against it

There’s more, but you get the idea. If you’re interested in the whole song, you can find it here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtMV44yoXZ0

The truth is (and you can find out what the government has to say about Obamacare at http://www.stopmedicarefraud.gov, but in short, it’s a plan to cut waste and fraud, increase benefits and help those in need with subsidies, and to pay for it while still reducing the national debt.

Now, being that the conservatives (as a rule) have to oppose just about anything that the liberals propose, it’s much easier for them to call it ’socialism’ than to stand up and say "We don’t want a 10% tax on indoor tanning or a half a percent tax on those of us who make more that two hundred grand a year!"

Probably the one aspect of this ’plan’ that I find objectionable is that it is structured to be implemented in steps over as many as eight years. This was done, in my estimation, so that the slow response to the implementations or unforeseen circumstances does not hobble the whole

system, and that, in and of itself, is a good thing. My concern is that, just as we have seen in the finance and credit card industry, given that amount of time, companies will find ways to circumvent these new provisions. Let’s face it; corporations are in business to make money, and that’s fine. But healthcare should be something different. It’s just too damned important to trust a bean counter to do the right thing instead of squeezing every last dime out of each of us to increase their profits.

In short, ’Obamacare’ isn’t socialized healthcare; it’s regulation. And we’ve already seen what happens when an industry has no regulation. Look at the finance industry of just a few years ago. The result of a lack of regulation and enforcement was that the entire system almost came crashing down around our ears. That’s what happens when a company’s end product becomes their stock offering and their real, physical product or service becomes just an inconvenient intermediate step to said stock offering. They lose sight of the rest of us, and the reason people buy their services and products in the first place. Ask GM about it sometime.

Well, that’s about it for this week, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - The World of Warcraft: Cataclysm!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" ’Call of Duty: Black Ops’ in 3-D!
Dragon Age 1 Affects Dragon Age II!

And more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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The World of Warcraft: Cataclysm Happens December 7

Buckle up World of Warcraft wonks, your world’s finally ending in December after five geophysically peaceful years of topographical regularity.

Kiss your Azeroth (as you know it) goodbye when the apocalypse takes place on December 7. Mark your calendars, take any final pictures, and say your farewells while you can.

The cost of catastrophe? $39.99 for the World of Warcraft: Cataclysm

regular edition, or $79.99 for a collector’s trove stuffed with a behind-the-scenes DVD, soundtrack, 176-page art book, trading card starter packs, and an exclusive in-game pet named Lil’ Deathwing, after the monster responsible for the looming disaster. Note the collector’s edition will only be available at retail.

Cataclysm marks Blizzard’s attempt to bring more than just a couple new races (werewolves and goblins), zones, raids, battlegrounds, and a new level cap (85) to the party. This time, Azeroth itself goes under the knife (or, if you will, world-sized payloader).

"Cataclysm includes the best content we’ve ever created for World of Warcraft," said Blizzard CEO and cofounder Mike Morhaime in a press statement. "It’s not just an expansion, but a re-creation of much of the original Azeroth, complete with epic new high-level adventures for current players and a redesigned leveling experience for those just starting out."

"With the help of our beta testers, we’re putting on the final polish, and we look forward to welcoming gamers around the world to enjoy it in just a couple of months."

Blizzard’s still soliciting beta testers if you want a sneak peek. I’ll wait. I’ve got my hands full leveling up a Tauren Hunter and Night Elf Druid before some guy in a rabbit suit shows up in Thunder Bluff with a stopwatch and I’m hearing Tears for Fears tunes over slow-motion raid video playbacks.

’Call of Duty: Black Ops’ To Be Released in 3-D

As if the gun-toting action in "Call of Duty: Black Ops" wasn’t expected to feel real enough in high definition, Activision Blizzard Inc. announced Tuesday that the latest entry in its successful first-person-shooter video game franchise would be released in 3-D, yet another addition to the 3-D revolution’s growing arsenal.

Mark Lamia, studio head at developer Treyarch, said "Black Ops" would be available in 3-D as an option for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC editions of the game when it is released Nov. 9. He said the game would be the same if played in 2-D or 3-D and that no content was created especially for the 3-D version, though it looks much more immersive.

"When you’re looking at the game in 3-D, the space you’re looking at feels real," said Lamia. "When I’ve got a weapon, and I’m painting a red dot on an enemy target, I’m painting a red dot on an enemy target. When I’m aiming down the sights, I’m aiming down the sights. When someone’s down the corridor, it feels like somebody’s down that corridor - for real."

"Black Ops," the seventh installment in the "Call of Duty" shoot-’em-up saga, will take aim at the Cold War, thrusting players into a time-hopping adventure that involves military cover-ups and shoot-outs in locales such as Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cuba and Russia. The game will also include extensive online multiplayer and cooperative "zombie" modes.

"We haven’t actually changed any art in the game as a result of 3-D," Lamia said. "It’s the same high-quality, high-fidelity art in both experiences.

It’s all engineering that’s gone into that. I think people are going to be shocked when they see it because they’re going to think that we crafted art or experiences for 3-D because it looks so good in 3-D."

The gaming medium is well suited to be displayed in 3-D because most modern games are already created in three virtual dimensions, unlike many films and TV shows that must either be filmed with special cameras or converted to 3-D. At this early stage, however, many gamers have yet to adopt the in-your-face technology because it requires a 3-D TV and glasses.

Only a handful of games, such as Ubisoft’s "Avatar: The Game" and Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment’s "Batman: Arkham Asylum," are available on the Xbox 360 and PS3 in 3-D, while hundreds of games, including Electronic Arts’ "Battlefield: Bad Company 2" and Capcom’s "Resident Evil 5," can be played on a PC in 3-D with the right equipment.

What You Did in Dragon Age: Origins Matters in Dragon Age II

All that time you put in ping-ponging around Ferelden with your multitalented entourage slaughtering Army of Darkness lookalikes in BioWare’s Dragon Age wasn’t for nothing.

Speaking to NowGamer, Dragon Age II lead designer Mike Laidlaw says Dragon Age II will know what you did last summer...or whenever you finally delivered the coup de grace in BioWare’s Dragon Age: Origins.

Like Mass Effect 2, Dragon Age II will scan your save game and offer a few shout-outs to choices you made in the original.

"We look at it as importing the world really," said Laidlaw. "I’ve always seen Dragon Age as a franchise as about more than any one character. It’s about an entire span of history and the whole world that’s affected by what happens."

"You know, who’s in charge of Ferelden, what happened with the Dwarves, who’s running Orzammar? All of these things are reflected and accounted for in Dragon Age II."

I thought the plot nods allowed for in Mass Effect 2 were actually pretty cursory, and I’m expecting the same in Dragon Age II. After playing a Mass Effect 2 import and then a fresh game, all that really changed was some window dressing here and there. I’d almost rather BioWare drop the import mechanics and spend the extra time in areas better served (say ensuring we never see a functionally ridiculous outfit like Morrigan’s in a game that billed itself as "the HBO of RPGs" again).

Until what you do (or did) can *dynamically* alter the plot, I’m happier knowing I’m experiencing fixed authorial creative choices, not just cueing up a few desultory choose-your-own-adventure beats.

Sales of Top Video Game Titles Boost Holiday Hopes

Finally, there’s a bit of good news this year for the video game business.

New titles from proven franchises, like Activision Blizzard’s Call of Duty and Electronic Arts Inc’s FIFA, are stoking hopes that the industry could emerge from its two-year slump after the holiday season.

After Microsoft’s Halo made $200 million on its launch day in September, EA’s FIFA 11 this month became the fastest-selling sports game ever.

This week, Activision said "World of Warcraft," its online role-playing game, has 12 million subscribers, the most subscribers ever to the game. Last year, it made $1 billion in revenue.

"When you look at how the industry looks today, we are seeing the top products doing really well," said Paul Sams, chief operating officer of Blizzard Entertainment, the unit of Activision that publishes "World of Warcraft."

Industry sales numbers, published by research group NPD, are due out next week and should provide a clearer picture.

Arvind Bhatia, a Sterne Agee analyst, expects September numbers to be better than August’s, when video game equipment and software sales were down 10 percent.

"It’s a tough economy, but the overall picture for video games is starting to look a little bit better," Bhatia said.

The $60.4 billion global video game industry, which dwarfs Hollywood’s annual box office take, is on shaky ground.

US video game sales are down 8 percent this year on top of an 8 percent drop in 2009, according to NPD.

EA shares were last trading at $16.68, down 7.3 percent this year, while Activision shares were at $11.01, down about 2 percent this year.

But with U.S. same-store sales rising more than expected in September, executives and analysts are more upbeat now than a year ago.

Activision’s console release, "Call of Duty: Black Ops," is expected to sell considerably more than ThinkEquity analyst Atul Bagga originally expected, generating an additional $90 million in revenue and adding 2 cents per share in profit.

Blizzard’s COO Sams called Black-Ops "absolutely one of the biggest titles of the year, if not the biggest," for its sister company Activision.

Cataclysm, the first World of Warcraft expansion pack released in two years, will also come out Dec 7 in time for holiday shopping.

"We’re very hopeful of what will occur in the holiday season for us," Sams added.

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The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

October Declared Cyber Security Awareness Month

Appropriately for a month that concludes with a holiday designed around scary things, October has been declared Cyber Security Awareness Month. President Obama recently signed a proclamation and urged everyone to back up files, keep Internet-surfing children safe, and "play an active role in securing the cyber networks we use every day."

National Cyber Security Awareness Month is part of a campaign organized by the National Cyber Security Alliance (NCSA) and backed by the Department of Homeland Security. The government agency said, "America’s competitiveness and economic prosperity in the 21st century will depend on effective cybersecurity."

NCSA said October’s designation is part of the first Global Online Safety Campaign, called STOP | THINK | CONNECT, which began Monday. The public-private partnership is intended to "help all digital citizens employ universal behaviors to protect themselves," the organization said.

Several companies have initiated specific security-related measures in support of the month.

Digital security firm McAfee, for instance, announced Monday it will expand its initiative to fight cybercrime. The McAfee initiative includes an Online Safety for Kids program, in which its employees and partners volunteer to teach schoolchildren about safety and security online. It also made a cybercrime grant to the National White Collar Crime Center to train more law-enforcement personnel to detect, investigate and arrest lawbreakers.

The cybersafety education program was piloted last year in more than 100 schools, and the company reports it has reached more than 3,000 children. It’s being expanded this fall to more schools in the U.S., as well as to other countries.

The initiative was originally announced by McAfee two years ago this month. It includes awards to individuals and organizations, an online resource portal, and an advisory council.

Security software provider CyberDefender has issued guidelines to keep families safe. The recommendations suggest that families set up separate user accounts for shared computers, make sure antivirus security programs are up to date, set up specific times each week to do virus scans on every PC, and talk among family members about smart computing practices.

Other tips from CyberDefender suggest using parental controls, keeping the security software suite running at all times, and calling a technician when problems arise, as opposed to only using software tools.

Visa said it will mark the month with a new web site to help cardholders and small businesses protect account data and avoid scams. It noted that a study from Javelin Strategy & Research found that more than 50 percent of consumers see the responsibility of protecting financial accounts as shared between users and the companies or institutions.

Some tips from the credit-card company include looking for the padlock icon in a browser’s status bar and an "s" after "http" in the URL when exchanging confidential information online. Users can also activate "Verified by Visa" to add extra protection during online checkouts, and the company pointed out that Visa never calls users for private account information.

Microsoft CEO Says Will See Windows Slates by Christmas

A Microsoft slate to counter Apple’s popular iPad tablet computer will be seen by the Christmas holiday, Microsoft’s Chief Executive Steve Ballmer said on Tuesday.

Ballmer did not say whether the palm-sized slates would actually be on sale in time for Christmas, nor did he say who would make them. Microsoft has been slow to respond to the iPad, and has also made little headway in mobile phones.

"You’ll see new slates with Windows on them. You’ll see them this Christmas," he told an audience of students, staff and journalists at the London School of Economics.

"Certainly we have done work around the tablet as both a productivity device and a consumption device," he said.

IT research firm Gartner expects 10 million tablet PCs to be sold this year as consumers begin embracing such devices, which include Dell’s Streak and Asustek’s Eee Pad. The Apple iPad alone sold 3.3 million in its first quarter.

At this year’s Consumer Electronics show in January, Ballmer unveiled a Hewlett-Packard tablet computer running Windows, beating Apple’s hotly anticipated move into the market.

But little has been heard about the device since HP agreed to buy smartphone maker Palm in April for $1.2 billion, and HP has said it plans a new crop of devices including tablets based on Palm software, although it will still offer Windows tablets.

Microsoft has also failed to make much headway in the smartphone market, where rivals like Apple and HTC are growing fast, while Research in Motion captured the corporate market with its BlackBerry.

Microsoft’s Windows phone software had 8.7 percent of the smartphone market last year and that is expected to decline to 3.9 percent by 2014, according to Gartner.

Microsoft also ditched a feature phone aimed at teenagers in July after just three months.

"The job right now is we’ve got to get back seriously into the game of phones," Ballmer said.

Ballmer did not get his maximum bonus for the last fiscal year despite scoring the company’s highest-ever sales, mainly because of missteps on phones and tablets.

Microsoft is due to launch its new Windows Phone 7 software later this month, after unveiling it a year later than expected at this year's Mobile World Congress in February.

"We've got to have a comeback against the competition and I think with our new Windows phones we really have a beautiful product," Ballmer said on Tuesday.

Verbatim Introduces New USB 3.0 Portable Hard Drive Line

Verbatim's new Store 'n' Go SuperSpeed USB 3.0 hard drives should be just what their name purports them to be: really fast, thanks to USB 3.0.

The new hard drives will come in three capacities: 500 GB and 700 GB will be available in October, and 1 TB will be available in November. The new drives are, of course, backwards-compatible with USB 2.0 ports for those of you who haven't yet upgraded your computers to USB 3.0.

SuperSpeed USB 3.0 features a 5Gbps data rate, which is significantly faster than Hi-Speed USB 2.0's rate of 480Mbps. For example, a 25GB movie will only take 70 seconds to transfer using a USB 3.0 port, as opposed to 13.9 minutes with a USB 2.0 port.

All capacities of the new Store 'n' Go hard drives will come bundled with Nero BackItUp & Burn software (Windows), a 5GB trial of Norton Online Backup, and a 7-year limited warranty. At the moment, there's no word on a price point.

OLPC Gets $5.6M from Marvell To Develop Tablet

One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) has received a $5.6 million grant from chipmaker Marvell to make an educational tablet device.

"The money is a grant to the OLPC Foundation to develop a tablet or tablets based on [Marvell's] chip," OLPC founder Nicholas Negroponte told Xconomy. "They're going to put the whole system on a chip."

The donation is an expansion of the partnership OLPC and Marvell announced in May. Both organizations signed an agreement to jointly develop the next generation of OLPC XO devices, the first of which will be a tablet set to debut next year. As part of the deal, OLPC will also make its design and reference work available to Marvell and its partners in order to get its technology more widely adopted.

Developing an OLPC tablet will be a two-step process. The Marvell-based tablet set to be released next year will likely be a "first world" Android-based device for children in the developed world. OLPC will follow that up the following year with its own Linux-based, plastic tablet that will work better in developing nations, according to Xconomy.

"The second one would have our brand on it, because it will be identified with and for the developing world," Negroponte said.

OLPC has had somewhat of a rocky path to its end goal of providing laptops to children in developing nations. It cut its staff by 50 percent in January 2009, saying at the time that it would refocus its mission on the development of second-generation laptops. In May, Ed McNierney, chief technology officer at OLPC, said that he still believes that transitioning to an ARM processor and tablet design point is where the organization needs to go.

iPad, Tablets Cannibalizing Laptop, Netbook Sales

Laptop sales are decreasing, and it looks like the iPad is to blame. It’s well known that the iPad has essentially destroyed the netbook, plummeting its sales into the negative, but now tablets are eating away at higher-end and less-portable laptop sales.

The NPD Group estimated that U.S. laptop sales rose 12.3 percent in the first eight months of 2010, which /sounds/ good, but was dramatically less than the 30 percent growth of the year-earlier-period. Laptop sales also dropped 1 percent in July and August 2010 - the peak of back-to-school shopping season, as the Wall Street Journal notes.

Blaming the iPad for the computer industry’s woes is the hippest thing to do nowadays, especially when sales numbers are compared to Apple’s. A Morgan Stanley/Alphawise study conducted in May showed that 44 percent of U.S. consumers who planned to buy an iPad were doing so in lieu of a netbook or notebook PC. Forrester Research also found that 14 percent of U.S. online customers plan to buy a tablet computer within the next 12 months, ahead of the 13 percent planning to buy a laptop, 11 percent planning to buy an eBook reader, 8 percent planning to buy a netbook, and 8 percent said to be planning to buy a desktop computer. The iPad is not a fad. At least for now.

In fact, the iPad is now the fastest-selling electronic device ever, and with Apple’s competition all building tablets - including RIM’s PlayBook, Samsung’s Galaxy Tab, Toshiba’s Libretto, Dell’s Streak, among others - the tablet market is set to inundate consumers with more choices, especially Android options. Android just became the most prominent smartphone OS, and more and more Android-powered tablets are being released or announced. While there is no such thing as an iPad killer - just as an iPhone-killer does not exist - Android might keep Apple up at night.

But the more options consumers are given, the more this situation looks like the rise and fall of the netbook. Not too long ago, netbooks were the must-have item. Then the tablet rose to prominence, and now retailers can’t sell netbooks fast enough. It’s hard to tell whether the tablet frenzy will mimic the now-faded netbook fad, but it would be wise for companies not to break their backs building tablets, lest they produce another JooJoo-esque embarrassment.

Apple Challenges $625.5 Million Patent-Infringement Award

Apple Inc. is challenging a federal jury’s order that it pay $625.5 million in damages for violating a small technology company’s patents.

If upheld, the verdict would be one of the largest in a patent lawsuit.

Last Friday, the jury in Tyler, Texas, found that Apple infringed on three patents held by Mirror Worlds LLC, a company founded by Yale University computer science professor David Gelernter to commercialize his ideas.

The patents cover characteristic features on Apple’s Macintosh computers, iPods and iPhones. The technologies include Cover Flow, which lets users flip through album covers and other content as if through a stack of cards; Time Machine, which performs automatic backups; and Spotlight, which is software for searching computer hard drives.

Over the weekend, Apple asked the U.S. District Court to hold off on imposing the jury award, saying there were still issues that needed to be addressed. Among other things, Apple objects to the way the damages were calculated.

Apple has not commented further on the case. Lawyers for Mirror Worlds did not return requests for comment.

In 1991, before access to the World Wide Web was mainstream, Gelernter published a book called "Mirror Worlds: or the Day Software Puts the Universe in a Shoebox...How it Will Happen and What it Will Mean." The volume laid out a vision of the future in which people can access and interpret unprecedented volumes of real-time, real-world data using a computer.

A decade later, Gelernter’s Mirror Worlds Technologies Inc. launched its first and only product, Scopeware, which could organize all sorts of information on a timeline or "lifestream." It looked like a cascade of index cards on the screen, each representing a unique piece of e-mail, a Web page, spreadsheet or other document, updated constantly as new items arrive. From descriptions at the time, Scopeware had a similar look to and functionality as Apple’s Cover Flow, which is built into the company’s Mac OS X operating system and the software that runs on iPods and other devices.

Parents, Teens Want More Privacy Online

A large percentage of U.S. parents would support a law requiring companies to be barred from collecting information about Internet users unless they explicitly agree, according to a new poll out on Friday.

Concern over privacy, which 85 percent of parents said they were more concerned about now than five years ago, has pushed lawmakers and federal agencies to advocate tighter rules.

A poll commissioned by Common Sense Media and done by Zogby International found support for government action.

The poll found that 92 percent of parents were concerned that teenagers and children were too open about personal matters online and that 75 percent believed that social networking sites failed to protect children’s privacy.

Eighty-eight percent of parents and 85 percent of teenagers wanted online companies to ask their permission before sharing information with advertisers, and 88 percent of parents would support a law making "opt in"

a legal requirement, according to the poll.

Since much of the information on the Web is free because it is a vehicle for advertising, companies have worried that "do not track" lists could shake the Web’s financial foundations.

But the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, which is pushing a plan to extend broadband, argued that privacy concerns could hurt Internet commerce.

"This distrust has implications for industry," FCC chairman Julius Genachowski said.

Federal Trade Commission Chairman Jon Leibowitz has urged the industry to do a better job of self-regulation or face tougher federal oversight.

"If there were a ’do not track’ adopted, I’m not sure that the rate of people who would not want to be tracked would be terribly high," he said.

Earlier this month, in an attempt to self-regulate, a coalition of major online advertising groups announced a program to allow Internet users to opt out of being tracked by marketers.

Rep. Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, and Rep. Joe Barton, a Texas Republican, criticized online marketers on Friday.

Markey, who was the author of legislation banning companies from collecting personal information about children aged 12 and under without parental consent, said he was also concerned about privacy related to health concerns.

"As more consumers seek health information online, individuals should not be targeted with advertisements based on information about medical conditions they may seek online unless they first choose to receive them," he said in a statement.

Criminals Will Continue to Use Zeus Trojan, Expert Says

Despite dozens of recent arrests targeting large online fraud organizations, other criminals are continuing to use the Zeus Trojan and other Web tools to steal identities and money from Internet users, one cybersecurity expert said Tuesday.

The arrests last week of dozens of people in the U.S., U.K. and Ukraine were a "massive coup" for law enforcement, said Patrick Peterson, CEO of Authentication Metrics, an e-mail authentication vendor. Those connected are suspected of being part of a huge criminal organization that has stolen about US$70 million from small businesses and other organizations in the U.S.

"This is really a breath of fresh air and a great success after a long time and a lot of frustration," Peterson said during a presentation at a meeting of the Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group in Arlington, Virginia. "The good news is that we’re seeing some great progress from law enforcement."

The not-so-good news is that it’s easy and relatively inexpensive for prospective criminals to launch their own online fraud operation, Peterson

said. The Zeus Trojan, a highly configurable piece of malware designed to steal personal information, is available for sale at several websites where cybercriminals gather, and there are dozens of versions available, he said.

In addition, Fragus, and other exploit kits, make it easy for cybercriminals to target specific vulnerabilties that may be on a computer, he said. And vulnerabilities in servers and browsers make it easy for criminals to hijack legitimate websites and send Web users to sites where they unknowingly download malware.

Fragus gives criminals a simple interface to check which applications they want to target, said Peterson, a Cisco Systems fellow. The exploit kit includes a reporting tool connected back to developers so that users can ask them to target new applications or operating systems, he said.

For an investment of about $2,500, a criminal could buy versions of Zeus and Fragus and get a thriving online fraud operation running, Peterson said.

These new cybercriminals have sophisticated systems in place to measure the success of their tools. Data later obtained from the Russian makers of the Mpack malware kit, which began appearing in 2006, showed that more than 13 percent of the computers in the U.S. that went to a defaced website became infected. More than 20 percent of the computers from Japan and Germany became infected when encountering Mpack malware, and more than 50 percent of computers in Romania became infected, Peterson said.

In addition, cybercriminals continue to use spamming tools to drive traffic to phishing websites, as well as affiliate programs with partners linking to exploited websites, he said. Many large criminal operations are using so-called money mules, people in targeted countries who will wire stolen money back to criminals overseas, he said. U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation officials said the Ukrainian Zeus operation employed about 3,500 money mules in the U.S.

Money mules are needed, because a U.S. cybercriminal targeting U.S. residents would be "rich for a day" before the FBI showed up at his house, Peterson said. With a money mule operation, it’s more difficult to track the money, with dozens of mules sending small amounts of money from multiple wiring locations.

Freedom of Speech ’Indispensable’: China’s Premier

Freedom of speech is indispensable and the people’s desire for democracy "irresistible," China’s Premier Wen Jiabao said Sunday, as he brushed aside criticisms that Beijing was curbing such rights.

"I believe freedom of speech is indispensable for any country, a country in the course of development and a country that has become strong," Wen told the network’s "Fareed Zakaria GPS" program.

He trumpeted the fact that in a country of some 1.3 billion people, there were 400 million Internet users and 800 million people with mobile phones.

And Wen revealed that he often logs onto the Internet.

"I have read sharp critical comments on the work of the government on the Internet and also there are commendable words about the work of the government," he said.

But in a rare interview with US media, Wen brushed aside widespread criticism from international observers and rights groups over efforts to censor the Internet, insisting China’s communist leaders were adapting.

"I believe, I and all the Chinese people have such a conviction, that China will make continuous progress and the people’s wishes for and needs for democracy and freedom are irresistible," Wen said.

"I hope that you will be able to gradually see the continuous progress of China."

China’s communist leaders have ruled with a iron fist since revolutionary leader Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of Communist China in 1949, but in past decades have gradually opened some spheres such as economic activity.

But they remain wary of loosening controls on freedom of expression and demonstrations, and there are many high-profile writers, lawyers and political activists currently imprisoned in China.

Wen repeated the government line that any such opening up of people’s rights "must be conducted within the range allowed by the constitution and the laws."

"So that the country will have a normal order. And that is all the more necessary for such a large country as China, with 1.3 billion people," he stressed.

"I often say that we should not only let people have the freedom of speech. We, more importantly, must create conditions to let them criticize the work of the government," Wen said.

"And it is only when there is the supervision and critical oversight from the people that the government will be in a position to do an even better job."

Earlier this year there were months of tension between Internet search engine Google and Beijing over state censorship and cyberattacks that Google said had originated in China.

And a senior executive from the social networking site, Facebook, said last month that Asia was the fastest-growing region for new subscribers despite restrictions on access in China.

China restricted access to the site in July 2009 amid deadly ethnic unrest in the restive far-western region of Xinjiang, but users have found ways of breaching the censorship wall.

China Blocks News of Peace Prize for Dissident

News that jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo had won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize quickly made headlines around the world Friday, but in China the

award was hard to find on TV and major Internet sites.

China’s official Xinhua news agency carried news of the prize in English and Chinese -- by headlining the government’s angry reaction to it.

But searches using the key words "Nobel Peace Prize" and "Liu Xiaobo" brought up no results on Chinese web portals Sina, Sohu and Baidu while similar searches on Weibo, a Twitter-like service, also drew a blank.

The evening news on China Central Television made no mention of Liu, opening instead with a story about flooding on the southern island of Hainan as foreign news outlets splashed the story across the front pages of their websites.

Text messages sent containing the full name of Liu Xiaobo appeared to be blocked, according to several tests carried out by AFP correspondents.

Liu, a writer and one-time university professor, was honoured "for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China," Norwegian Nobel Committee president Thorbjoern Jagland said in his announcement.

Beijing slammed the decision as a violation of the Nobel Peace Prize’s ideals, while the laureate’s joyful wife led calls for his immediate release.

China - which has repeatedly branded the 54-year-old a criminal following his December 2009 jailing for 11 years on subversion charges - also warned Norway that ties would suffer over the Nobel committee’s decision.

Beijing operates a vast system of web censorship, sometimes referred to as the "Great Firewall of China". It blocks access to any content the government deems unacceptable, ranging from pornography to political dissent.

Critics at home and abroad complain that the Internet rules stifle criticism of the ruling Communist Party and restrict discussion on sensitive topics such as Tibet and the brutal crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy protests.

Doctors Warn of ’Toasted Skin’ from Prolonged Laptop Use

It’s been a joke among computer users that working too long with a notebook PC on your lap can lead to a laptop tan. Swedish researchers aren’t laughing. They say using a hot laptop that rests on your legs can give you mottled, discolored skin that could lead to a condition called "toasted skin syndrome".

In a case cited by the journal, a 12-year-old boy developed "sponge-patterned skin coloration" on his left thigh after playing video games with the computer on his lap for a few hours a day for several months. The image on the right, courtesy of Dr. Benabio, of a "toasted" thigh shows the disgusting details.

Another case that’s come to light involves a law student in Virginia, the AP reported. In that instance, the future lawyer showed up at the Eastern Virginia Medical School complaining about mottled discoloration on her leg.

When probed about her work habits, the student revealed she spent about six hours a day working with her laptop which could reach a temperature of 125 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the assistant dermatology professor who examined the student, Dr. Kimberley Salkey.

The Swiss researchers, Drs. Andrea Arnold and Peter Itin, told the AP that laptops rarely get hot enough to burn their operators, but they can cause skin damage that might lead to cancer. The physicians, however, could not cite any specific cases where that happened.

Other dangers from prolonged laptop usage in a lap have been reported in the past, according to the Daily Mail. For example, Dr. Dr. Yefim Sheynkin conducted research at New York State University at Stony Brook demonstrating that a laptop balanced on the thighs raises the temperature of male sperm by three degrees Centigrade. That could trigger fertility problems and over time could cause irreversible damage, he concluded.

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